

Historical Revisionism and Popular Opinion

Editorial

[Richard A. Widmann](#)

In 1966, Harry Elmer Barnes declared, "During the last 40 years, revisionism has become a controversial term."^[1] In the nearly 50 years since, "revisionism" has shifted from controversial to a purely negative term, at least in the eyes of the general public. Today "revisionism" has become synonymous with telling lies or distorting the truth with some specific agenda in mind. U.S. President George W. Bush exemplified popular opinion regarding revisionism in 2003 when he lashed out in a speech given to a group of New Jersey business leaders, "Now there are some who would like to rewrite history: revisionist historians is what I like to call them." Only one day later, Bush made similar remarks while speaking at a community college in a Washington suburb, "I know there's a lot of revisionist history going on. But he [Saddam Hussein] is no longer a threat to the free world."^[2] Three years later under the governorship of Jeb Bush, the state of Florida passed a law intended to ban revisionist history from being taught in its public schools.

The relevant paragraph in the final bill reads:

The history of the United States, including the period of discovery, early colonies, the War for Independence, the Civil war, the expansion of the United States to its present boundaries, the world wars, and the civil rights movement to the present. American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable, and shall be defined as the creation of a new nation based largely on the universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence.^[3]

The original text was modified in the final bill, but its language reveals the intent behind the bill: "The history of the United States shall be taught as genuine history and shall not follow the revisionist or postmodernist viewpoints of relative truth."^[4]



President George W. Bush announces his \$74.7 billion wartime supplemental budget request at the Pentagon. Pentagon, Washington, D.C. (Mar. 25, 2003). Bush positioned himself not only as an "anti-Revisionist" but also as a "savior of mankind" for his maneuvers in Iraq.[Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

In fact, revisionism is attacked politically from both sides today. The inroads made by "New Left" historians, most famously Howard Zinn and his *A People's History of the United States* has set conservatives fuming. [5] Recent news stories conversely condemn libertarian Senator Rand Paul for what is referred to as the "GOP's revisionist history." A reporter complains,

"In this revised Republican history, there's no Nixon 'Southern Strategy,' no Reagan Kenosha County Fair 'States Rights Speech,' no Lee Atwater, no RNC voter-caging, no 'Obama Monkey' dolls, no First Lady/Planet of the Apes jokes, no Trayvon Martin smears, no Shirley Sherrod smears, no voter ID laws, no six-hour voting lines, and Republicans didn't argued [sic] before the Supreme Court for the repeal of sections of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 this February." [6]

In another recent news story a "whitewashing" of Islamic history is referred to as "Revisionist history." In the article it claims,

"ACT for American Education, a non-profit organization dedicated to raising awareness of Islamic fundamentalism, said it found examples of historical revisionism in 38 of the most popular history textbooks used in public schools." [7]

In popular opinion, revisionism represents all of the ills described in the examples above: relativism, denigration of values, omission of vital facts, whitewashing and outright lying.

While Barnes correctly pointed out that "revisionism means nothing more or less than the effort to revise the historical record in the light of a more complete collection of historical facts, a more calm political atmosphere, and a more objective attitude," [8] we must consider who in the public's definition of "revisionism" is really guilty of those misdeeds commonly associated with the term.

Warren Cohen's valuable 1967 volume, *The American Revisionists* is quite instructive on historical relativism. He writes,

"It is worth noting, as Harry Baehr has, that since World War II public attitudes on the interwar revisionist controversy have been reversed. The battle won in the 1920s and 1930s by men like Harry Elmer Barnes, Charles Beard, C. Hartley Grattan, Walter Millis, and Charles Tansill has since been lost. And, as Baehr noted, not new evidence but attitudes toward World War II and American intervention in World War II have reversed the tide. The prominence of Barnes, Beard, and Tansill on the side of those whose "truths" regarding FDR's policies have thus far been rejected has served further to bring their pre-Pearl Harbor work into disrepute." [9]

Denigration of values is often associated with the smearing of reputations. A key source of public opinion and popular knowledge is Wikipedia. Today the article on Harry Elmer Barnes focuses nearly half its length on the subject of "Holocaust denial" a subject that Barnes never entertained in his writings. [10] Besides the long list of those tarred by the "denial" brush, [11] the core values of the West itself have suffered under a politicized reevaluation of values. Patrick Buchanan comments,

“Before the bar of history, America and the West have been indicted on the Nuremberg charge of ‘crimes against humanity.’ And all too often Western intellectuals, who should be conducting the defense of the greatest and most beneficent civilization in history, are aiding the prosecution or entering a plea of nolo contendere. Too many can only offer the stammering defense of the ‘good Germans’ – ‘But we did not know.’”[\[12\]](#)

Buchanan continues,

“In moving this indictment, the revolution has complementary goals: to deepen a sense of guilt, to morally disarm and paralyze the West, and to extract endless apologies and reparations until the wealth of the West is transferred to its accusers. It is moral extortion of epic proportions, the shakedown of the millennium.”[\[13\]](#)

It is totally acceptable to omit facts and whitewash historical events as long as the prevailing ideologies are upheld. The mass expulsion of 12 to 14 million Germans by the Allies at the end of the Second World War is rarely mentioned in standard school texts despite the huge numbers of victims.[\[14\]](#) Richard Evans comments,

“This massive act of expulsion and forced migration is still largely unknown outside the countries most closely affected by it. The story appears in standard histories of Germany and Europe in the twentieth century as little more than a footnote. Calling it to public attention questions the widespread popular understanding of World War II as a wholly good fight by the Allies against the evil of Nazism and German aggression.”

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as well as the saturation bombings of the civilian populations of Dresden and Hamburg do not diminish the reputation of the “Greatest Generation.” While certain atrocities go down the Orwellian “memory hole” for fear of relativizing the war conduct of the National Socialists, others are repeated incessantly.[\[15\]](#) The morbid tales of Nazi soap manufactured from Jewish cadavers, while long discredited[\[16\]](#) are repeated today for example on Wikianswers:

Evidence has been found by allied investigators that fat from the corpses of dead Jews were indeed used to make soap in Stutthof, a concentration camp. The experiments to convert human fat into soap were conducted by a Nazi officer called Dr. Rudolf Spanner. The soap was often used to clean autopsy rooms of Nazi experimentation morgues.

It is true about the buttons too. The Nazis made buttons, bowls, goblets and so on out of human bone. They also used human skin to create lampshades, handbags and leather for chair coverings and book covers.[\[17\]](#)

Even out-and-out lies are deemed acceptable if they uphold the new ideologies that shape public opinion. One of the most egregious lies is that of the eleven million victims of Nazism. The popular tale is that in addition to the six million Jewish victims, there are five million “other victims” of the Holocaust. Author Peter Novick explains the origin of the myth,

“Where did the number come from? Although there is no detailed paper trail, it’s generally agreed that the figure of eleven million originated with Simon Wiesenthal, the renowned pursuer of Nazi criminals. How did he arrive at this figure? The Israeli historian Yehuda Bauer reports that Wiesenthal acknowledged to him in a private conversation that he simply invented it.”[\[18\]](#)

The public may be right to denounce “revisionism” if we are to think of it as lies and outright distortion of history with the primary purpose of smearing and morally disarming the West and its greatest benefactors. But then what shall we call the “revisionism” that advances the efforts of Harry Barnes, James Martin, Murray Rothbard, Paul Rassinier, and Charles Tansill – the effort to, in the words of Rothbard, bring “historical truth to an America and a world public that had been drugged by wartime lies and propaganda.”?[19]

Since “revisionism” has been hijacked, perhaps we should simply call it “truth.”

Notes:

- [1] Harry Elmer Barnes, “Revisionism: A Key to Peace,” *Rampart Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring 1966, p. 8.
- [2] For more on this matter, see my article, “George Bush versus Revisionism,” *The Revisionist*, Vol. 1, No. 3, August 2003, pp. 244-45, online: [node/94](#)
- [3] American Historical Association, “American Historical Association Statement on the 2006 Florida Education Bill,” (Jan 7, 2007)
online: http://www.historians.org/governance/pd/2007_01_08_Florida.cfm
- [4] Ibid.
- [5] See for example, Robert McCain, “The Case against Howard Zinn,” *The American Spectator*, August 2, 2010, online: <http://spectator.org/archives/2010/08/02/the-case-against-howard-zinn>
- [6] Rich Jones, “Sen. Paul offered NAACP GOP's revisionist history,” April 17, 2013,
online: <http://www.rgj.com/article/20130418/OPED02/304180026/Sen-Paul-offered-NAACP-GOP-s-revisionist-history>
- [7] Bill McMorris, “Revisionist History: Education consultants working to whitewash history of Islam in public schools,” online: <http://freebeacon.com/revisionist-history/>
- [8] Barnes, Op. Cit., pp. 8-9.
- [9] Warren I. Cohen, *The American Revisionists: The Lessons of Intervention in World War I*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967) pp. viii-ix. Harry Baehr’s article, “A Cycle of Revisionism between Two Wars,” appears in Sheehan (ed.) *Essays in American Historiography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).
- [10] Online: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Elmer_Barnes Barnes made some passing comments in articles and wrote a review “Zionist Fraud” of a book by Paul Rassinier, *The Drama of the European Jews* which originally appeared in the Fall 1968 issue of *The American Mercury*, online: <http://theamericanmercury.org/2010/04/zionist-fraud/>

- [11] See for example the chapter "Hunting Germer Rudolf" in Germer Rudolf, *The Rudolf Report: Expert Report on Chemical and Technical Aspects of the 'Gas Chambers' of Auschwitz* (Chicago: Castle Hill Publishers, 2001). Also see David Irving, *Banged Up: Survival as a Political Prisoner in 21st Century Europe* (Windsor: Focal Point Publications, 2008).
- [12] Patrick J. Buchanan, *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), p. 57.
- [13] Buchanan, Op. Cit., p. 58.
- [14] Richard Evans, "The Other Horror," *The New Republic*, June 25, 2012.
Online: <http://www.newrepublic.com/book/review/orderly-humane-expulsion-germans-richard-evans> Also see Alfred M. de Zayas, *Nemesis at Potsdam: The Expulsion of the Germans from the East*, (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1989) and James Bacque, *Other Losses: An Investigation into the Mass Deaths of German Prisoners at the Hands of the French and Americans after World War II* (Canada: Stoddart Publishing, 1990). In this and other works Bacque documented the largest act of ethnic cleansing the world has ever known.
- [15] For an interesting analysis of relativizing the Holocaust and its implications see, K.R. Bolton, "Historical Revisionism and Relativising the Holocaust," *Inconvenient History* Vol. 4, No. 2, Summer 2012.
Online: http://inconvenienthistory.com/archive/2012/volume_4/number_2/historical_revisionism_and_relativising_the_holocaust.php
- [16] Michael Berenbaum, Director of the USHMM's Holocaust Research Institute (1993–1997); wrote for example, "We don't have any evidence that the Nazis actually manufactured soap with human bodies,"
online: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/soap.html> Even anti-revisionist Deborah Lipstadt noted in 1981, "The fact is that the Nazis never used the bodies of Jews, or for that matter anyone else, for the production of soap." ("Nazi Soap Rumor During World War II," *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1981, p II/2.) For an exceptional analysis of this subject see, Mark Weber, "Jewish Soap,"
online: <http://www.ihr.org/leaflets/soap.shtml>
- [17] Online: http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Did_the_Nazis_make_buttons_and_soap_out_of_Jews&altQ=Did_the_Nazi's_make_buttons_and_soap_out_of_Jews (accessed 21 April 2013)
- [18] Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), p. 215.
- [19] Murray Rothbard, "On the Importance of Revisionism for our Time," *Rampart Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring, 1966. p. 3.

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